

The Resources of the Vancouver City Archives

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THE RESOURCES OF THE VANCOUVER CITY ARCHIVES

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Bill McKee

Since moving into its new home in Kitsilano in late 1972, the Vancouver City Archives has witnessed a major expansion in its holdings. In mid-1974, former City Archivist R. Lynn Ogden published a summary in the Urban History Review of the records and services then available at the City Archives. The present article is intended to suggest several ways in which urban historians might use those resources and several collections subsequently acquired.

As the official repository for the historical records of the City of Vancouver, the Archives is best equipped to serve historians interested in the evolution of municipal government and its impact on the city. The records of the Office of the City Clerk - consisting of the City Council minutes, the minutes of the committees of Council, the voluminous City Clerk's correspondence files, civic bylaws and voters lists - provide a broad base for such studies. Historians concerned, for example, with the civic programme to provide fire protection services following the disastrous fire of June, 1886, must refer to this collection. While the records of the Fire Department prior to 1929 are especially thin, the Council and Committee minutes and correspondence files of the City Clerk illustrate in detail the genesis and development of the Fire Department. Those wishing to trace the role played by civic government in the formation of Vancouver's industrial base are also advised to turn to the City Clerk's papers, where the story is told of early civic campaigns to induce industry, such as sugar refining and iron smelting, to the city. The files of the Mayor's Office, originally interfiled with the records of the City Clerk and then retained as a separate collection after the turn of the century, act as a complement of the City Clerk's papers in many cases.

Those wishing to examine the role played by other civic departments in the evolving urban scene should consult the papers of the Engineering, Planning and Police Departments, or the School and Park Boards. For instance, researchers wishing to examine living

conditions among the urban working class should turn to the records of the Engineering Department, which provide a comprehensive picture of the extension of sewer and sidewalk services to various sections of the city. The extension of water services may be traced in the records of the Water Rates Division of the Department of Finance, also held at the Archives. School and Parks Boards records may be used to discover the level of educational and park services in working class districts. The records of the Police Department, especially the various court calendars, could be consulted to determine the relationship between the expansion of urban population and the growth or decline of various forms of crime.

Historians of the relationship between municipal and senior governments will also find many resources of value. Once again, the papers of the City Clerk's and Mayor's Offices - especially their extensive correspondence files - could act as the foundation for such research. Both record groups contain, for example, the numerous appeals by city authorities to the provincial government for alterations to the provincially granted City Charter and the pertinent provincial responses. This correspondence reveals the periodically acerbic relations which developed between Vancouver and Victoria as a result of these exchanges. These collections also contain letters which reflect the relationship between the city and federal governments through the years; the copious correspondence between Vancouver and Ottawa dealing with Stanley Park, foreshore rights and rights-of-way for bridges illustrates the extensive impact the federal government has had on the local environment.

In the course of examining correspondence files on civic relations with senior governments, researchers may encounter unexpected, yet important information about the urban community. For instance, the correspondence between the City of Vancouver, Victoria and Ottawa over the title to and disposition of the Kitsilano Indian Reserve, says much about the evolving role of the urban Indian.

Students of the history of supra-municipal government will also find much in the Archives which would be useful. Since the Archives is the official repository of the Greater Vancouver Regional

District, it holds the papers of the Regional District, its components such as the Regional Hospital Board, and its predecessors, the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board, and the Greater Vancouver Water and Sewerage Boards. Since these records reach back to 1911, they illustrate how municipal authorities in and about Vancouver have gradually joined forces to cope with the problems posed by rapid urban growth. The records of the Burrard Peninsula Joint Sewerage Board demonstrate one of the earliest of these co-ordinated programmes. The records of the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board tell how local municipalities first attempted to harness, in a co-ordinated manner, the urban sprawl which occurred in the years following the Second World War.

Public records are, of course, not the only sources for the study of urban history. In the manuscript division of the City Archives are other diverse and rich sources, which demonstrate the role played by the semi-public and private sectors in the construction of this metropolis. Researchers may wish to acquire copies of the Preliminary Inventory to Additional Manuscripts at the City Archives, edited by Sheelagh Draper.¹ Three collections of semi-public institutions bear examination. The records of Vancouver General and Royal Columbian Hospitals, for instance, tell much about the development of public health services in the city. The records of Vancouver General illustrate, furthermore, the emergence of the superhospital - the massive medical facilities which have appeared in many larger cities and are designed to provide special services to both the city and its hinterland. The papers of the Pacific National Exhibition could be used to illustrate how local businessmen used the fair to develop the image that Vancouver was the economic centre of the province and to induce settlement and investment to the city.

The private sector has usually been the catalyst of Vancouver's growth. The papers of the Board of Trade, for instance, trace the

¹Copies of the Preliminary Inventory may be purchased from the Vancouver City Archives, 1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C. To date, four volumes, listing MSS 1-200, are available at \$3.50 each.

campaigns by local businessmen to have communications with cities on the American West Coast upgraded, and to have railway links with the mineral-rich Kootenays improved, in order to make Vancouver rather than Spokane the metropolitan centre for that region. The papers of the Downtown Business Association report the persistent efforts by businessmen in the central business district to maintain and even expand the economic role of the "downtown". The records of the Downtown Parking Corporation, a component of the D.B.A. collection, demonstrate one of the approaches adopted by businessmen to make the downtown more attractive to shoppers and to counter the shift by consumers to suburban shopping centres.

Those interested in the history of urban land costs will find several collections of value. The local land records of the Canadian Pacific Railway, recently acquired by the Archives, would be the key to any study, since that company was originally granted virtually all of the land in the centre of Vancouver. The records of the Vancouver Real Estate Exchange, its successor the Greater Vancouver Real Estate Board and several smaller firms complement the C.P.R. Collection. Using these papers and local newspapers, historians should be able to trace - in a selective sense - the changes in land values in early Vancouver.

Those historians wishing to analyze the role of the waterfront in the development of Vancouver will find a host of relevant records. The records of the Maritime Museum, Board of Trade, local Merchants Exchange, Chamber of Shipping, Shipping Federation, Grain Exchange, Towboat Association and International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union provide an almost comprehensive picture of activities in the port from the 1880's to the 1950's. The minutes of the harbour committee of City Council show how municipal authorities have attempted to affect the development of one sector of the local environment which is however beyond their jurisdiction.

Students of urban history wishing to make comparisons between Vancouver and other communities need not step outside the City Archives; they will discover that the papers of the municipalities of Point Grey and South Vancouver, which amalgamated with the City of Vancouver in

1929, are also in the City Archives. Urban historians interested in comparing the development of communities dominated by different income groups will find these collections of value; council minutes and local improvement records should illustrate how residential income level determines community development. Students of the historical relationship between the suburban belt, that is Point Grey and South Vancouver, and the central business district in Vancouver should also find these records valuable. Researchers interested in pursuing further comparative studies are advised to turn to other Archives in the Greater Vancouver area. The records of several municipalities, including Burnaby, are for instance presently housed in the library at Simon Fraser University. The City of North Vancouver Archives should be operational within the year. British Columbia's original capital city, New Westminster, does not operate a civic archives. Both the New Westminster Public Library and Irving House Historic Centre, however, hold papers of relevance to the history of the Royal City.²

For those interested in urban development on a broader plane, the Archives has collected papers and publications produced by the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat) which was held in Vancouver in 1976. The files of proposals submitted by each national delegation, which illustrate their suggested solutions to the world-wide, mushrooming problems of human settlement, will be of particular value to those interested in tracing the evolution of urban housing and the development of the wider concept of urban planning. Researchers are also advised that the Centre for Human Settlements at the University of British Columbia holds the audio-visual presentations

²Before travelling to the Lower Mainland, researchers are advised to contact the respective institution for details on collections. At Simon Fraser, researchers should write to the Archivist, Special Collections Division of the library. For enquiries concerning North Vancouver, researchers should contact the City Archivist, Presentation House, 209 West 4th Street, North Vancouver. With respect to New Westminster, researchers should write to the Chief Librarian, Public Library, 716-6th Avenue; and the Curator, Irving House Historic Centre, 302 Royal Avenue.

submitted by each national delegation to the U.N. Conference.³

Researchers interested in examining some of the collections referred to in this article are advised to contact the Archives prior to travelling to Vancouver. This is recommended since access to several collections is restricted and obtainable only with the donor's permission.

The Archives, which is open from Monday to Friday from 9:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., holds other than public records and manuscripts. Urban historians should find the map collection of particular value. A collection of fire insurance atlases dating from the 1880's to 1960's, graphically portrays the growth and evolution of the metropolis. Such a resource can also be used to illustrate urban living conditions. The map collection also includes almost 1,000 maps from the Lower Mainland Regional Planning Board and its successor, the Planning Department of the Greater Vancouver Regional District, which illustrate the attempts to control post-war urban sprawl in the Lower Mainland. The photograph collection, largely compiled by Major J. S. Matthews, Vancouver's first City Archivist, is notable because most prints are accompanied by a caption meticulously explaining their historical significance. Here again is a resource which portrays the evolution of the city and urban living conditions. A selection of photographs of Vancouver's West End, for example, illustrates the alteration of the district from a forested wilderness in the early 1880's to a treeless, new residential district for the city's more prosperous citizens in the late 1880's. Later photos of the same scene illustrate its recent transformation into a densely occupied apartment zone.

Researchers using the City Archives will find standard services available. Most unrestricted documents may be photocopied; the Archives will not however duplicate entire documents and limits

³Before travelling to Vancouver, researchers are advised to write the Director, Human Settlements Centre, University of British Columbia in Vancouver to enquire about details of collections and the terms of access.

photocopying privileges to 250 sheets per researcher each year. Microfilm reader-printer machines are available for the growing inventory of documents being placed on microfilm. The Archives also provides a copy service for its photograph collection; a fee schedule for this service is available. Researchers requiring further information should write to the Vancouver City Archives, 1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C., V6J 3J9.